

Lychees and Bingo Balls

Tina Freeth

When she first arrived 'fresh-off-the-plane', Wai Po sat on our burgundy velour sofa with the silver fringe, her feet hung precariously mid-air.

Her bottom was permanently planted on the seat nearest the TV.

No, she wasn't mail-ordered from the internet as seemed to be the trend with eighteen-year-old beauties from Bangkok who adopted names like Venus or Beauty. Wai Po was my mum's mother. My grandmother.

She came to live with us because there were no relatives in Hong Kong to take care of her. Her husband was one of the unfortunate people to contract the SARS virus: a rare, contagious disease which had broken out in China the year before. He died wearing a useless facemask with Mickey Mouse motifs printed all over it.

I felt sorry for her, despite the fact that when she first met me she told my mum that only peasants had skin as dark as mine and that to lighten it I should drink a pint of milk a day.

I must have been as alien to her, as she was to me. She couldn't speak a word of English and I couldn't speak Chinese – Cantonese or Mandarin. I only knew about ten words, including 'egg' and 'cat', neither of which cropped up in my stifled conversations with her. I mean, it was nice finally meeting her in person, but part of me felt concerned that she had been taken out of her natural habitat.

Bugbrooke is definitely not Hong Kong.